

WE ARE STILL PENN STATE: TAILGATING AS COMMUNITY AT PENN STATE UNIVERSITY

Svitlana Iarmolenko
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management
The Pennsylvania State University
svi5028@psu.edu

So Young Bae
The Pennsylvania State University

Garry Chick, Ph.D.
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether tailgaters at The Pennsylvania State University (PSU) football games see themselves as members of a community and are seen as such by University officials. Data were collected with interviews and photo elicitation from 80 adults and three University officials in the Athletic Department. The results indicate that both participants and officials see tailgating as reflecting key characteristics of a community, including loyalty, attachment, and identification with the group and the experience.

1.0 Introduction

For many U.S. universities, football programs are not only a point of pride, but also a major source of revenue (Nemec, 2011). This is particularly true for big “football universities.” At PSU, the money generated by the football program supports other athletic programs. Additionally, tailgating prior to, during and after football games allows alumni to connect with the University and the larger community. Tucker (2004) found that successful football programs and surrounding tailgating activities have positive effects on alumni giving rates so their contribution to universities goes well beyond ticket sales.

Attendance at PSU games has been decreasing in recent years. Average attendance at Beaver Stadium was 96,730 in 2012 compared to 108,917 in 2007 (NCAA, 2012). Events in the fall of 2011, including the Jerry Sandusky scandal and the firing of Joe Paterno, may have exacerbated this trend. Therefore, it is imperative that PSU finds ways to encourage attendance at football games. One option is to provide the experience of *communitas* through tailgating. McGinnis, Gentry and Gao (2008) defined *communitas* as “a temporary process whereby people of different backgrounds and places within the social order communicate and bind with one another without considering one’s social standing as a divide” (p. 76). They found that experiencing *communitas* sustains enduring involvement in leisure activities. The purpose of this study was to document whether tailgating is perceived as a community both by participants and University officials and whether the elements of *communitas* experience are characteristic for a tailgate. This information may help University staff with developing activities and programs that will enhance the *communitas* experience. These subsequently may help sustain tailgaters’ involvement in tailgating and possibly attendance at football games.

1.1 Tailgating as a Community

Since its initiation in 1869, tailgating has attracted an estimated 50 million tailgaters in the United States who spent \$7-15 billion on tailgating and related supplies in 2006 (Megerian, 2007). The term tailgating refers to “those consumers who participate in sports tourism, not only by attending the event, but by devoting hours or even days before, during, and after the event to socialize amongst others interested in the same event” (Nemec, 2011, n. p.). Tailgating has grown from a picnic that is served from a vehicle’s tailgate before a sporting event into a much bigger phenomenon. We argue that, for some long standing and popular events, tailgating has evolved into distinct communities.

The concept of community is frequently used, yet elusive. Talcott Parsons defined a community as a “plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the ‘optimization of gratification’ and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols” (in Allen, 1990, p. 184). This perspective focuses on the values and interactions between social units constituting a community. Among the many conceptualizations of a community and its facets, three elements dominate: (a) spatial consciousness, (b) commonly shared ties, and (c) interactions with one another (Allen, 1990). These elements appear to characterize tailgating as it happens in specific areas adjacent to a sporting facility, has fans with shared ties to a team, and active interactions between different tailgaters are prolific. Bain-Selbo (2007) surveyed tailgaters at a southern university and found that “college football ranked behind only family and friends in regard to where fans experience the greatest sense of community – ranking just ahead of church” (p. 5). The fact that fans encounter each other as equals, regardless of their roles in the social structure in the outside world, also contributes greatly to a sense of

community, “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). In a study devoted to tailgating at PSU, Phillips (2009) found the existence of an “imaginary community” based on tailgates and PSU football. A strong sense of community may have major consequences for the tailgating and game experiences and possibly for sustaining game attendance.

1.2 *Communitas* and Tailgating

Community is thought to be a tangible outcome of *communitas* (Bain-Selbo, 2007). First suggested by Turner, *communitas* found wide application in leisure pursuits such as baseball viewership (Holt, 1995); skydiving (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993); and golf (McGinnis, Gentry, & Gao, 2008). Bain-Selbo (2007) applied the notion of *communitas* to college football suggesting that “through their participation in pilgrimage, tailgating, and all the other rituals of the college football game day, fans create a distinctive community. They generate *communitas*” (p. 5). The experience of *communitas* is richly charged with pleasurable affect, provides an egalitarian encounter with others, and thus keeps people coming back for more. At tailgates, people often share food thus creating a sort of communion (Bain-Selbo, 2007). Viewing *communitas* as an origin of a successful and strong community, Esposito (2009) suggested three pillars of a successful *communitas* experience: loyalty, emotional attachment to the community, and identification with it. In this study, we explored whether these three pillars are present in PSU tailgaters’ perceptions of the pre-game tailgating experience. The presence of the elements of *communitas* will allow University staff to enhance and sustain involvement in tailgates (McGinnis et al., 2008), as well as use these pillars in marketing efforts aimed at increasing football game attendance.

2.0 Method

2.1 Data Collection

Data were collected at multiple tailgating areas outside PSU’s football stadium prior to, during, and shortly after two football games in October and November 2012. Four two-person teams of interviewers (a note taker and an interviewer) collected data using semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation. Using convenience sampling, 80 groups of tailgaters were interviewed. The interview procedures included the following four steps. First, each interviewer team approached a group of tailgaters and asked a member of the group if he or she was willing to participate in a tailgating study. Second, the interviewer asked a series of questions based on an interview guide while the note-taker observed and took notes on the tailgaters and the tailgating environment. Third, the interviewer gave respondents a digital camera and asked them to take four to six pictures of “what tailgating means to him/her.” Fourth, respondents were asked to interpret their pictures as the interviewer continued an on-site follow-up interview. Each interview took 10 to 25 minutes and all were recorded using a digital voice recorder with the permission of respondents.

Subsequently, three university officials in the Athletics Department were contacted and asked for an interview. In the course of an hour and a half-long semi-structured interview with all three of them together, each was asked about the decrease in attendance and its possible reasons, the public relations campaign following the Sandusky scandal, whether the Department sees tailgating as an expression of community and, finally, whether there are any efforts in place to support and enhance this community. The official’s responses were documented with abbreviated notes and later expanded into an interview transcript.

2.2 Data Analysis

Data consisted of transcripts of the interviews conducted with respondents. We used deductive content analysis based on the work of Patton (1990) and relied on the results of the interviews that were facilitated by photo elicitation. First, in photo elicitation participants take pictures and then describe their significance in a follow-up interview. In this study, the transcripts linked to the follow-up interviews were carefully reviewed and analyzed to clarify participants’ intentions because “what photos appear to be” and “what they really represent” may be different (Stedman, Beckley, & Ambard, 2004, p. 585). Second, unlike the inductive data analysis approach that begins with open coding and ends with creating categories and abstraction, the deductive data analysis approach is based on existing theories, models, or mind maps (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). In this study, the key pillars of successful *communitas* experience (i.e., loyalty, identification, and attachment) were first identified from the literature (e.g., Esposito, 2009). Then, interviews were systematically analyzed to find support for each of these pillars in a two-step process. Data were reviewed by each author individually to produce support for the pre-identified categories. The authors met to compare their results and discuss the level of support for each of the categories. They circulated all identified quotes among all three of them. Only those quotes that were agreed upon by all three authors to belong in a certain category were used to support that category.

The transcript of the interview with university officials was reviewed by the authors and essential quotes were chosen that reflect the officials’ perception of tailgating at PSU, as well as information about their Department’s efforts to manage tailgating.

3.0 Results

3.1 Tailgating Interview Results

Individuals' responses to questions about their photos of the tailgating experience resulted in more than 40 pages of text. Careful analysis revealed quotes that support loyalty, identification, and attachment (i.e. the pillars of a successful *communitas* experience/community). First, respondents felt strong loyalty to PSU, PSU football, and tailgating. One said, "We've always followed Penn State football. You know, when I was growing up we always followed Penn State." Others mentioned how long and how many times they have been tailgating: "We've been here for 39 years. Every home game!" and "We've tailgated since 1980!" Many groups have been tailgating for at least 10 years and some for 20 to 30 years. It was surprising to find that many non-alumni tailgaters are loyal to PSU football as well. They described themselves as "lifelong Penn State football fans."

Second, we found evidence that respondents identify strongly with the University, the football program and the tailgating community. They refer to "identity" directly by saying "This is an identity thing. This is who we are, a part of a big family." The theme of family, which included other fans, recurred frequently: "We are one team, we support it, support the Penn State family." Identification with PSU was also reflected through the use of its motto: when asked why they tailgate and go to games, respondents exclaimed "Because We Are! [Penn State]!" Even more impressive, respondents who indicated that they are not alumni and have no official affiliation to the University, still strongly identified with PSU football and the tailgating ritual: "None of us are [alumni]. It's just because we loved Penn State football all these years."

Identification with the University and tailgating communities transcends individuals to include families with children and grandchildren now attending the University and participating in tailgates: "Now she [daughter] is 21 and it's nice to come here and be an adult, so it's kind of a rite of passage as well." Being part of the PSU family and identifying with it is so indispensable to families that participating in tailgates and attending the University is considered a family rite of passage. Identification with the University community is not only something cherished, but also displayed with fervor through clothing, tailgating gear, etc. When asked why they wear items with the Penn State logo on them, respondents said "Just to represent!", and commented how it is a way of showing that they identify with PSU and it represents their identity at the tailgate.

Third, tailgaters also described their emotional attachment to PSU. It was often expressed as love towards the University, PSU football, the tailgating atmosphere, and their peer tailgaters. Referring to the pictures showing a sea of cars and many tailgaters having fun, one respondent indicated that he loved "the excitement of everybody being here," "the thrill," and "the energy." For some, tailgating meant "fitting in with everybody" while wearing PSU clothing and expressing their support for the University. Above all, however, a number of respondents said that they just "love" the University and PSU football very much.

3.2 Athletic Department Interview Results

The interview with the three University officials presents a fascinating picture. On the one hand, the officials recognize PSU football fans and tailgaters as a distinct community, noting that "Tailgating is one of the rare times when Penn State is a community." They believe that the tailgating experience is much more than just football viewership, it's "...both a community and a heritage. It is about the individual experience." They used a neighborhood analogy: "...just as there are types of neighborhoods, there are types of tailgates that impact the types of interactions that occur. The structure of the tailgating event matters – there is something about the spatial proximity of tailgates that creates community-like feeling and encourages communication. Also the activity, or shared experience, contributes to the formation of tailgating community." They also saw it as a ritual and noted that, over time, tailgating had remained a big event but had become even more ritualized with more regalia included in it.

On the other hand, officials noted that there are virtually no plans in place to affect or strengthen this sense of community. Basic game day management leaves no time, money or human resources to enhance a sense of community at tailgates. Currently there is a small scale pep rally at the adjacent basketball and event arena as well as an alcohol free parking lot available for family friendly tailgates. However, there is no large scale concerted effort aimed at the community of tailgaters. This is quite surprising considering that officials recognized tailgating as the only competitive advantage that the live game experience has over viewing games on television: "People can watch the game at home, with their own couch and snacks, and warm comfort. The only part of the game experience that isn't available through TV is tailgating." If officials want to increase attendance at the games, working on enhancing the tailgating experience may be a place to start.

4.0 Discussion

The data provide support for the notion that tailgating can be perceived as a distinct community. Our findings add to the knowledge on community and *communitas* expanding it to include the phenomenon of tailgating. Following Esposito's (2009) conceptualization of the successful elements of *communitas*, which translate into strong communities, we found support for loyalty, identification, and emotional attachment of tailgaters to tailgating, as well as to the football program and the university itself. Expressed in quotes such as "Because We Are" and "This is just an identity thing," respondents demonstrated that the

tailgating community is an indispensable part of who they are, including their identity. They share long histories of participation, with some respondents coming back each football season for more than 30 years. There is also much emotional connection and attachment to tailgating and the football team; this seemed to remain just as strong even after the Fall 2011 events at the University. Previous research on tailgating at PSU showed that it is “loyalty to an ideology: an ideology of family, small-town Americana, community, pride, success, friendship, and ‘doing things the right way’” (Phillips, 2009, p. 2). Our findings show that this is still the case today.

We also explored the perception University Athletics Officials have of tailgating and uncovered a conundrum. Although officials clearly see tailgating as “...much more than just football, a community” and recognize that tailgating might be the only competitive advantage that live game day experience has over television viewing of the game, little effort is being employed to enhance the tailgating community.

Despite its importance, Allen (1990) argued that the link between satisfaction with community services and the psychological sense of community has largely been ignored. Our results demonstrate a link between the phenomenon of tailgating and the concept of community with the possibility of using community satisfaction tools to address the issue of decreasing attendance.

Our study has several limitations, however. First, data were collected from a convenience sample as we did not have a systematic approach to which tailgates would be chosen for interviews. Second, several teams conducted data collection so each interviewer’s personal style introduces variability into the way questions were administered. We recommend that future studies adopt more systematic sampling and interviewing procedures. Finally, this study is limited only to football tailgating at PSU and should be replicated at other universities as well as with other college and professional sporting events (e.g., basketball, baseball). We also suggest directly asking for the perceptions of community at tailgating events, and meanings associated with the community-like feel at these events. The Sense of Community Index (SCI) would be applicable to examine a sense of community in the context of various events (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999).

5.0 Implications and Conclusion

With over 50 million tailgaters in the United States, tailgating is a large market not to be overlooked by university athletics marketing departments (Megerian, 2007). Kerstetter and her colleagues (2010) suggested that enhancing the tailgating experience should be initiated by universities in order to fill stadium seats. We extend this suggestion by recommending that such initiatives be directed at enhancing the feelings of community and community satisfaction among tailgaters. Allen (1990) suggested that development of positive affect for the community comes from satisfaction with human services, including recreation and leisure services, so we suggest enhancing the community feeling of tailgates by providing opportunities for common engagement in leisure activities, such as various competitions between tailgate groups. Social media can also be involved, with opportunities to create university-supported online communities where people can share stories and photos to maintain the feeling of connectedness to the event even during the off-season.

Additionally, it would be useful to promote tailgating as a highlight of the game day experience and, as mentioned by University officials, something that people cannot get while watching the game on television. In doing so, themes of loyalty, identity, and emotional attachment can be stressed. These themes are directly related to creating the experience of *communitas*. McGinnis et al. (2008) found that the sense of *communitas* maintains enduring involvement in leisure activities. Thus, creating the experience of *communitas* and its tangible outcome, “community,” will enhance the tailgating experience and maintain people’s involvement in tailgating. Such involvement, in turn, may help fill the stadium seats and address the current issue of declining attendance.

These findings, although based on data gathered only at PSU, may be helpful to other universities with major football programs who are addressing attendance issues. In addition, since our recommendations focus on the perceptions of community, they can be useful to other events that attempt to create or enhance the community feeling. The involvement of other parties in school such as student groups or academic affairs would be also encouraging to enhance school spirit as a whole.

6.0 References

- Allen, L. R. (1990). Benefits of leisure attributes to community satisfaction. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 22(2), 183-196.
- Auh, S., & Cook, C. C. (2009). Quality of community life among rural residents: An integrated model. *Social Indicators Research*, 94(3), 377-389.
- Bain-Selbo, E. (2007). *Structure and Communitas: The Affirmation and Negation of Race, Class, and Social Class in Southern College Football*. Popular Culture Association.
- Chavis, D. M., Hogge, J. H., McMillan, D. W., & Wandersman, A. (1986). Sense of community through Brunswik's lens: A first look. *Journal of community psychology*, 14(1), 24-40.
- Chipuer, H. M., & Pretty, G. M. (1999). A review of the sense of community index: Current uses, factor structure, reliability, and further development. *Journal of Community psychology*, 27(6), 643-658.
- Coleman, S. (2002). Do you believe in pilgrimage? *Communitas*, contestation and beyond. *Anthropological Theory*, 2(3), 355-368.

- Drenten, J., Peters, C., Leigh, T., & Hollenbeck, C. R. (2009). Not just a party in the parking lot: An exploratory investigation of the motives underlying the ritual commitment of football tailgaters. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 18(2), 92-106.
- Drozda, J. (1996). *The tailgater's handbook*. Knoxville, TN: Masters Press.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107-115.
- Esposito, R. (2009). *Communitas: The origin and destiny of community*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- James, J., Breezeel, G. S., & Ross, S. (2001). A two-stage study of the reasons to begin and continue tailgating. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 10(4), 212-222.
- Kerstetter, D., Stansfield, M., Dombroski, P., Bae, S. Y., Usher, L., & McKinney, M. (2012). The multiple meanings associated with the football tailgating ritual. Proceedings: Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium.
- McGinnis, L. P., Gentry, J. W., & Gao, T. (2008). The impact of flow and communitas on enduring involvement in extended service encounters. *Journal of Service Research*, 11(1), 74-90.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of community psychology*, 14(1), 6-23.
- Megerian, C. (2007). The prize in the parking lot. *Business Week*: 11.
- Mellander, C., Florida, R., & Stolarick, K. (2011). Here to stay – The effects of community satisfaction on the decision to stay. *Spatial Economic Analysis*, 6(1), 5-24.
- NCAA (2012). NCAA Football attendance. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/NCAA/Resources/Stats/Football/Attendance/index.html>
- Nemec, B. M. (2011). Tailgating at Collegiate Sporting Events. Master's Thesis Proposal.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Phillips, B. P. (2009). *A Community in a Cow Pasture: Football at Penn State* (Doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State University).
- Stedman, R., Beckley, T., & Ambard, M. (2004). A picture and 1000 words: using resident-employed photography to understand attachment to high amenity places. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 16, 580-606.
- Theodori, G. L. (2001). Examining the effects of community satisfaction and attachment on individual well-being. *Rural Sociology*, 66(4), 618-628.
- Tucker, I. B. (2004). A reexamination of the effect of big-time football and basketball success on graduation rates and alumni giving rates. *Economics of Education Review*, 23(6), 655-661.